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HEADLINE: THE CHALKBOARD / LAURA PAPPANO;
AS INTERNET USE RISES, FAMILIES WITHOUT ACCESS LAG BEHIND

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BODY:

Parent Deborah Burnett is forever checking Marblehead Middle School's Web site or e-mailing daughter Jessica's seventh-grade teachers.

"I have one teacher I'm going to e-mail tonight because we are missing each other - she has been calling me at work and I call her and she is in the classroom," said Burnett of Hyde Park, whose daughter participates in the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, or Metco, the 36-year-old program sending urban children to suburban schools.

At many schools today, directories list parents' e-mail addresses, used for activities as varied as sounding an alarm about a local education issue, checking in with teachers, or getting out birthday or social invitations. Schools also are putting more information on Web sites, guarding against papers lost between school and home or left in the backpack. Some teachers have their own Web site on which parents can view homework assignments.

Internet use is coming of age - not just in schools, but around school communities. But what if you're not hooked up?

"This is where the digital divide becomes a serious crisis for American education," said Henry Jenkins, director of Comparative Media Studies at MIT. If middle- and upper-middle-class parents now have a better way of communicating with their children's teachers and schools, said Jenkins, "you will create a two-class structure where working-class kids fall further and further behind. The Clinton administration goal of wiring the classrooms is only half the step."

According to US Census Bureau figures, the percent of households with Internet access has risen from 18 percent in 1997 to 41.5 percent in 2000. But figures show a gulf between rich and poor, with 79 percent of families with incomes over \$75,000 a year having Internet access in 2000, and only 19 percent of families with incomes below \$25,000 having Internet access.

Burnett, who finds the Internet "is just much easier communication" and critical to monitor her daughter's schooling, fields calls from other Metco parents asking her to look up information for them on school Web sites.

Elaine Munn, president of the Metco Directors Association, said that while schools and teachers are accommodating to unwired parents - happily faxing or sending written notes - the reality is that more and more school business is done via the Net.

"The technology today is called the computer and everybody wants to do everything online because it is less time," Munn said. "For city families, it is not less time because they don't have a clue how to have access. There are a lot of people in the inner city who don't even know how to work a computer. We tell our parents how important it is to keep open communication with their child's teacher, but with today's technology it makes for a wider gap."

Needham High School English teacher David Smokler gives homework in class, but also posts it on his Web site. "I've found it helpful for parents who want to keep track of what the assignment is and what their kid is supposed to be doing," said Smokler, who also communicates with parents via e-mail.

In Cambridge, the Internet and e-mail have become integral in the debate on school closings and consolidations.

Over the Thanksgiving holiday, Morse School parent Guy Barnard set up an online platform that had attracted 276 registered users as of last week: www.cambridgepublic.us.

"It's really an online forum to debate the challenges and issues in the Cambridge public schools," said Barnard, who said the mayor, faculty, and School Committee members are among those registered. Barnard, who is the parent of a first-grader, says he believes his site gives voice to parents who may not be vocal at School Committee meetings. "Suddenly, e-mails have started going backwards and forwards," he said.

How important is it for school communities to exist online?

Ann Grady, director of instructional technology for the Boston public schools, is in a district where only about one-third of families have Internet access at home. While online communication will not replace face-to-face meetings, she said, it can vastly improve communication, which is critical to student school success.

"It is very difficult for teachers and families to connect because teachers are teaching all the time and families, for the most part, are working," Grady said.

Last year, the district launched "My BPS," a five-year initiative to develop an intranet system that lets parents log in and view their child's information, including report card grades and homework assignments. Parents also will be able to e-mail teachers about assignments and students will have their own e-mail addresses.

In addition, the Boston Digital Bridge Foundation is piloting a program called Technology Goes Home @ School with fourth-graders in five elementary schools and at Tech Boston High School. Classroom teachers are training low-income parents on computer use, said Steven Gag, Mayor Thomas M. Menino's technology adviser. The 60 families participating will receive computers this month along with a year of Internet access. The program will be expanded to 12 schools next year, but the hope is that positive reactions and the growth of online usage will persuade more parents to see the value of buying computers and gaining online access.

"The ultimate goal is a community of 110,000 users - 10,000 administrators and teachers, 60,000 students, and 40,000 families," said Gag, who noted that the school district went paperless this year, making information and forms available online.

Online communication may be more expedient, but Harvard Graduate School of Education professor Pedro Noguera worries that it may overtake face-to-face interactions. Sending a message online may be fine to announce event changes, he said, but important discussions "between a teacher and a parent about student progress need to be in person."

Hashing out Internet etiquette - when it's appropriate to e-mail, call, or make a personal visit - also may take some time. The professional world still struggles with such delineations. One key question: As technology becomes an increasing part of school life, where should it stop?

Deborah Zetterberg, principal of the Chandler School in Duxbury, which has 760 children in pre-K through Grade 2, has computers in classrooms and students learning Internet skills. While the teachers have e-mail, she said an intense electronic community may be too much of a burden to maintain.

"Someone said, 'Can't you do a 'Hotmail' thing if you're going to do early release?' " she said, describing a parent's request for online bulletins in case of snow or other closings. But Zetterberg said that she herself checks e-mail only twice a day. Being constantly online may work in business but not in education, she said.

"We are working with kids," she said. "Other professionals spend a lot of time in front of a computer. We don't do that because we are in front of children."